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SUBJECT: CODEL ENGEL DISCUSSES FTA AND DCA, ENCOURAGES COLOMBIAN LEADERSHIP IN REGIONAL COUNTERNARCOTICS EFFORTS

REF: 09 BOGOTA 3635

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) House Foreign Affairs Committee Western Hemisphere Subcommittee Chairman Eliot Engel led a Congressional delegation to Cartagena and Monteria, Colombia from January 7-10, 2010. At his private ranch in Monteria, President Uribe outlined Colombia's progress, with U.S. support, on counternarcotics efforts but cautioned that much remains to be done. Uribe addressed human rights violations, violence against labor unions, and social and economic development. He thanked the Members for extending unilateral trade preferences for Colombian exports under the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA) and asked them to expedite ratification of the bilateral U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The Defense Minister highlighted Colombian assistance to a number of governments in the region in building their capabilities to combat narco-trafficking. In meetings with the Government of Colombia and in remarks to the press, Chairman Engel praised the GOC as a close and reliable ally in the region, highlighted the important gains made under the Uribe administration, and clarified misconceptions about the recently signed U.S.-Colombia Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA). He told President Uribe that there are many merits to the FTA but warned that U.S. domestic political issues would prevent the legislation from being passed immediately. Engel also explained his efforts to create a commission to comprehensively review U.S. counternarcotics policy with a focus on reducing demand and developing a broader regional approach to eradication and interdiction. The delegation's agenda also included: a meeting with the Mayor of Cartagena; a visit to a vocational center for demobilized child soldiers; a maritime interdiction briefing at the Colombian Navy base (one of seven included in the DCA); a roundtable discussion with Afro-Colombian leaders; and finally, briefings from the Colombian Narcotics Police on seaport counter-narcotics efforts, and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement personnel about implementation of the U.S. Container Security Initiative. END
SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) In an unprecedented meeting at his private ranch in the cattle-growing area of Monteria, during which his wife personally prepared and served breakfast and his two sons assisted with maps and flow charts, President Alvaro Uribe interrupted his vacation to host HFAC Western Hemisphere Subcommittee Chairman Eliot Engel (D-NY), Lynn Woolsey (D-CA), Shelley Berkley (D-NV), and Pedro Pierluisi (D-PR), accompanied by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Christopher McMullen. Uribe was joined by Minister of Defense Gabriel Silva, Vice Minister of Trade Gabriel Duque, High Commissioner for Peace and Reintegration Frank Pearl, Social Action Director Diego Molano, and Colombian Ambassador to the United States Carolina Barco.

¶3. (U) Uribe presented his model of building confidence in Colombia based on the three pillars of security with democratic values, investment with social responsibility, and social cohesion. He underlined that, with the essential support of the United States, the State has recovered its monopoly to fight criminals and administer justice, has built confidence in democratic institutions, and has provided assistance and reparations to the

victims of conflict. Uribe highlighted social investments in education, health, and housing, while conceding that the government was still lagging in providing housing for internally displaced persons. Regarding the DCA, Uribe said the majority of Colombians support it and he hoped neighbors would eventually recognize how the agreement benefits the region.

¶4. (SBU) Uribe thanked the Members for extending unilateral trade preferences for Colombian exports under the ATPDEA and asked them to expedite ratification of the bilateral U.S.-Colombia FTA, noting that Colombia had been and would remain an important regional ally and could serve as a counterweight to the growing relationship between Venezuela, Bolivia, and Iran. He said that by the end of January, the GOC hopes to sign an FTA with the European Union and that the Colombia-Canada FTA would be presented soon in the Canadian Parliament. He said the lack of an FTA with the United States made it difficult to finalize agreements with other trading partners.

URIBE AND DEFENSE MINISTER EMPHASIZE HUMAN RIGHTS

¶5. (U) President Uribe emphasized the importance of protecting human rights, which he described as essential to maintaining confidence in the government and public support for its Democratic Security policy. Citing government statistics supporting significant reductions in murders, kidnappings, and attacks on labor union leaders, 2,000 of whom are now under direct government protection. Uribe acknowledged that much work remains to be done. He said he would not be satisfied until the number of labor union homicides was zero. He referred to increases in the investigations and prosecutions related to the homicides of unionists and noted that in many cases these murders appeared to have nothing to do with the victims' affiliation with organized labor.

¶6. (U) Referring to "false positive" killings - military murders

presented as killed in combat - Defense Minister Silva said that no cases of "false positives" were presented in 2009. He added that all cases of combat killings were now sent directly to the Office of the Prosecutor General (Fiscalia) for investigation rather than being processed through the military justice system. He acknowledged that the Fiscalia had received 39 complaints of alleged human rights abuses by members of the armed forces in 2009. Silva said that in each of these cases, the military personnel involved were removed from their units pending the results of the investigations.

COLOMBIA AS REGIONAL LEADER IN COUNTERNARCOTICS EFFORTS

¶7. (SBU) Defense Minister Silva discussed Colombia's assistance to Mexico in building its capacity to combat narco-trafficking, money laundering and hostage taking. He further explained that Colombia now provides training to investigators, and anti-narcotics police in, Guatemala, Panama, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Paraguay. He said the GOC engages in joint counternarcotics activity with Peru and intelligence sharing with Chile. Silva said he had also

met recently with his Ecuadorian counterpart to lay the groundwork for intelligence cooperation.

¶8. (U) President Uribe remarked that Colombia faces new challenges as a consumption country, with one million Colombians now classified as consumers. He cited a recent constitutional amendment making it illegal to possess small quantities of drugs for personal consumption and said the GOC would devote more resources to prevention, education, and rehabilitation. Referring to the Copenhagen climate change summit, Uribe said he hopes to raise awareness of the environmental impact of illicit crop cultivation which contributes to climate change as narco-trafficking organizations clear the Colombian rainforest to grow coca.

¶9. (SBU) At the Cartagena Navy Base, Navy Commander Admiral Guillermo Barrera expressed his gratitude for the "essential partnership of the U.S." and briefed the delegation on the record number of cocaine seizures achieved by international cooperation, improved intelligence sharing, and the deployment of aerial surveillance and his-speed interdiction boats. He claimed that, in aggregate, 31 dollars in cocaine had been seized for every dollar invested in resources since the U.S.-Colombia Maritime Interdiction Agreement was signed in 1997. He highlighted that the Colombian Navy's School of Maritime Interdiction hosted students from 12 partner countries. An International Maritime Analysis Center, in which 17 countries will participate, is scheduled to be based in Cartagena.

MEMBERS underscore ANTI-DRUG COOPERATION, DCA AND FTA

¶10. (U) In meetings with President Uribe and Admiral Barrera, Chairman Engel outlined his Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission legislation (HR 2134) that passed the House of Representatives in December. The legislation is modeled after the 9/11 Commission and intends to establish an independent commission to comprehensively review U.S. counternarcotics policy. He said the United States needed to focus more on demand reduction and take

a broader regional (versus bilateral) approach to eradication and interdiction. Engel praised Colombia as a "remarkable success story" and thanked the GOC for exporting its knowledge and experience to the region. Representative Pierluisi echoed the Chairman's remarks, describing the domino effect of counternarcotics policy; as soon as drug activity is reduced in one area, it simply migrates to another, more permissive environment.

¶11. (U) Speaking to the press, Chairman Engel described Alvaro Uribe as an "extraordinary president" and praised Colombia a close friend and key ally in the region, adding that reliable allies should be rewarded. Stating that Colombia has good friends in both parties, he offered to discuss with his colleagues in Congress and President Obama the strategic implications of the FTA with Colombia. He cautioned, however, that domestic political considerations and competing priorities in the United States made it unlikely that the FTA would be ratified imminently. Turning to the DCA, Engel emphasized that the agreement does nothing more than modernize, consolidate, and codify existing agreements without threatening Colombia's neighbors or increasing the presence of U.S. military personnel in Colombia.

EMPHASIS ON AFROCOLOMBIANS AND CHILD SOLDIERS

¶12. (U) Over lunch, the Members engaged in a discussion with Afro-Colombian leaders in Cartagena representing the community, civil society and the business sector. Despite their diverse backgrounds, the leaders were unanimous in arguing that Afro-Colombians are disproportionately affected by displacement due to the armed conflict, unemployment and sexual tourism. They also criticized the GOC for its lack of support for land titling initiatives. Several participants emphasized how plans to privatize beaches in Cartagena would exacerbate the economic challenges Afro-Colombian small business owners already confront. The leaders offered minimal feedback, however, in response to Chairman Engel's question on how the United States could better support Afro-Colombian communities. Separately, during the meeting in Monteria, President Uribe mentioned that the GOC was in the process of designing a Colombian version of Affirmative Action and would seek advice from the United States. (Note: On January 12, during his visit to Colombia, Deputy Secretary of State Steinberg signed an Action Plan on Racial and Ethnic Equality with Foreign Minister Jaime Bermudez. End note.)

¶13. (U) Cartagena's dynamic mayor, Judith Pinedo, herself an Afro-Colombian, shared her vision of reuniting the two Cartagenas--rich and poor--divided by a social and economic gap. Pinedo noted that the poor are predominantly members of the Afro-Colombian community. She highlighted the growing role of Cartagena as an international gateway to Colombia.

¶14. (U) The delegation also met with youth at risk of recruitment by illegal armed groups and former child soldiers who receive assistance from Colombia's Escuela Taller, a vocational skills training center for underprivileged youth supported through USAID's Child Soldiers Program. The program provides income generation opportunities for participants while helping them to reintegrate socially into the community. Several youth participating in the program shared with the Members their emotional stories of recruitment (frequently by coercion) into armed groups, life in those groups (often marked by abuse), and their subsequent desertion and gradual rehabilitation through Escuela Taller.

¶15. (U) CODEL Engel cleared this cable.

NICHOLS